

Béla Balázs, *Visible Man*, or the Culture of Film (1924)

INTRODUCTION: ERICA CARTER
TRANSLATION: RODNEY LIVINGSTONE

In 1924, the Hungarian critic Béla Balázs published, in German, *Der sichtbare Mensch oder die Kultur des Films/Visible Man, or the Culture of Film*. Two years later, the Berlin-based critic and journal editor Andor Kraszna-Krausz wrote that ‘the original appearance of Balázs’s volume triggered an international press success of a kind seldom witnessed among contributions to aesthetic philosophy’. Despite occasional contention – Siegfried Kracauer for one, while welcoming Balázs’s formulation of film’s ‘inner aesthetic’, had chastised the author for his undialectical political conclusions¹ – Kraszna-Krausz also ventured the prediction that *Visible Man* would ‘rank in future among the most valuable documents in film history’.²

Kraszna-Krausz’s review was to an extent prophetic. Certainly, Balázs is routinely acknowledged alongside Rudolf Arnheim, André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer as a central figure in film theory of the classical period from the 1920s to the early postwar years. Yet it is not primarily on early works like *Visible Man* that Balázs’s reputation rests. Despite widespread acknowledgement by Balázs’s contemporaries that his prewar German-language works were the first significant contributions to a ‘dramaturgy’ of film, reception of his work in the English-speaking world has remained dependent on his *Theory of the Film*, a 1952 translation (from the Hungarian) of Balázs’s 1948 *Filmkultúra: A film művészetfilozófiája*. The Hungarian volume integrates and synthesizes passages from all three of Balázs’s previous substantial film-theoretical works – alongside sections from *Visible Man*, it draws on his *Der Geist des Films/Spirit of Film* (1930) and on large portions of the Russian

1 Siegfried Kracauer, ‘Bücher vom Film,’ *Frankfurter Zeitung*, no. 505, 10 July 1927. Reproduced in Béla Balázs, *Der sichtbare Mensch oder die Kultur des Films* (1924) (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001), p. 171.

2 Andor Kraszna-Krausz, ‘Béla Balázs: Der sichtbare Mensch. Eine Filmdramaturgie,’ *Filmtechnik*, no. 21, 16 October 1926. Reproduced in Balázs, *Der sichtbare Mensch*, p. 168.

Iszkustvo Kino/The Art of Film (1945). Yet it loses in the process much of the scintillating textual detail and polemical verve of the earlier works which had set theoretical discussion in the context of contemporary cinema and film: shifts in actorly performance engendered in film by the new interrelation of camera and the gestural body; or the transformations in acoustic perception that Balázs saw as arising from the transition from silent film to sound.³ Missing, too, are many of the social-theoretical speculations that situate Balázs's work, however contentiously, as an engaged contribution to a politics of mass-cultural modernity in the turbulent Europe of the late interwar period.

The absence of full translations of Balázs's early works has produced an imbalance in his anglophone reception, in particular a tendency, as Sabine Hake points out, to read as a 'closed system of thought' works that are in fact the product of the 'specific historical conditions' of the late 1920s and early 1930s – a period which saw the coming of age of silent cinema, the artistic and commercial crisis triggered by the advent of sound, and the conditions of political emergency experienced by Balázs's generation of critical intellectuals in the face of European fascism and the rise of the Third Reich.⁴ The extracts from *Visible Man* translated here represent the first stage of an attempt to retrieve, for anglophone readers, the historical traces not only of a Balázs committed to the theoretical project of a new aesthetics of film, but also of a critic embroiled in the evolving film politics and creative practices of his time.⁵ As Hake again points out, Balázs's biography is emblematic for an entire generation of European intellectuals, many of them Jewish, whose personal and intellectual life trajectories were shaped not only by war and political turmoil but also by the rapid cultural transformations and intellectual and artistic ferment of Central Europe between the wars.

Born Herbert Bauer in Szeged, Hungary, in 1884, Balázs assumed his future pen name at the age of sixteen, honed his literary skills by writing poetry, and won a scholarship in 1902 to the prestigious Eötvös College in Budapest. Balázs began collaborations here with, among others, Béla Bartók and Georg Lukács, attended seminars under Georg Simmel during a study tour in Berlin, and pursued a career as poet, critic and dramatist alongside his doctoral studies in aesthetics, philosophy and the German literary tradition. His political involvement with the Hungarian Left during this period culminated in participation, alongside Lukács, in the socialist revolution of March 1919, then exile in Vienna following the collapse of the short-lived Commune the following month.

It was in Vienna after 1921 that Balázs first turned his hand to writing about film. Alongside translations into German of his own earlier literary works, he started writing scripts, and then became a regular and prolific film reviewer for the Austrian daily *Der Tag*. The two hundred or so reviews he is estimated to have penned in that period provided Balázs with material grounding for what was to become his landmark contribution to early film theory, *Visible Man*. Opening with a triple 'address by way of a preface' to the three constituencies – aesthetic

3 See Balázs, *Der sichtbare Mensch* and *Der Geist des Films* (1930) (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001). For a comprehensive survey of Balázs's literary production, see Hanno Loewy, *Béla Balázs: Märchen, Ritual und Film* (Berlin: Vorwerk 8, 2003).

4 Sabine Hake, *The Cinema's Third Machine: Writing on Film in Germany 1907–1933* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), p. 214.

5 A full translation of *Visible Man* will be published in Berghahn's *Film Europe* series in 2007.

philosophers, film directors and cinema audiences – that he wishes to persuade of the value of a theory for film art, Balázs proceeds, in the course of this ninety-page treatise, to stake his claim for film as an art that may restore to modernity the lost expressive capacities of the visual body – ‘visible man’. That plea, moreover, is in no sense limited to the (admittedly invigorating) polemic of the book’s opening. In a lengthy section, *Sketches for a Theory of Film*, Balázs lists the constituent elements of his proposed film dramaturgy. Under such headings as ‘Type and physiognomy’, ‘The play of facial expressions’, ‘The closeup’, ‘The face of things’ and ‘Nature and naturalness’, Balázs presents a typology of expressive elements which together comprise what he proposes is the ‘only shared universal language’, the image-language of film. Sections from Balázs’s introduction, together with extracts from his theoretical sketches on performance, the closeup and montage are reproduced in translation below.

This translation project has a purpose beyond a simple rehistoricization of Balázs’s theory of film. In a recent contribution to *Screen*, Annette Kuhn draws historical parallels between the theoretical enterprise of contemporary film analysts – herself included – who seek to understand the significance of new media technologies and forms and those twentieth-century theorists who grappled similarly with film as a medium ‘as groundbreaking and excitingly novel as today’s new media are for us’.⁶ Kuhn’s recourse is to André Bazin, whose writings on the cinematographic organization of space within the frame (joined here by Kuhn to psychoanalytic accounts of the cinematic experience) are drawn upon to open perspectives on cinema as an intermediate zone between inner and outer worlds, and as a medium capable therefore of ‘replaying or re-evoking certain states of being which are commonly experienced as inner’.⁷

Comparable arguments to Kuhn’s can be made for revisiting the Balázs of *Visible Man*. In addressing questions around spectatorship and popular reception, Balázs’s project also has relevance for contemporary studies of the screen image. His observations on film’s capacity to ‘inspire and give shape’ to ‘the imagination and the emotional life of the people’ touch on issues of popular spectatorship that have been a key focus of attention in film studies since the 1980s.⁸ What Balázs shares with Bazin is an approach to the film experience through aesthetic philosophy; indeed his first preface offers a spirited defence of a ‘philosophy of the art of film’ that should explore questions of film meaning via an account of the medium’s distinctive aesthetic. Kuhn points to the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty as the source for Bazin’s exploration of the cinematographic processes – focus, framing, light, and so on – that establish the parameters for film’s particular organization of the spectator’s experience of ‘being’ in space and time.⁹ While Balázs’s interest is similarly in the phenomenological organization of experience (the influence of phenomenology is evident, for instance, in his concern with film as an art of the surface image – *Flächenkunst*), both his object

6 Annette Kuhn, ‘Thresholds: film as film and the aesthetic experience’, *Screen*, vol. 46, no. 4 (2005), p. 404

7 *Ibid.*, p. 407

8 Balázs, *Der sichtbare Mensch*, p. 10.

9 Kuhn, ‘Thresholds’, p. 405.

and his philosophical sources are different from Bazin's. Since his preoccupation in *Visible Man* is not centrally with *mise-en-scène*, but with what he sees as the cultural resurgence of the sensual body through the silent moving image, Balázs turns in the first instance to Romantic accounts of the body in nature, reshaped here for a new account of the 'physiognomy' of the film image.

In a key passage, Balázs maintains that 'Culture appears to be taking the road from the abstract mind to the visible body. . . . Conscious knowledge turns into instinctive sensibility: *it is materialized as culture in the body*' (Balázs's emphasis). Balázs's obscure terminology, and in particular his apparent privileging of 'instinct' over culture, have led many later readers (while acknowledging the significance of his analyses of actorly performance or the face in closeup), to dismiss as 'mystical', 'outdated' or 'essentialist' what is assumed to be an account of the film image as physiognomic window to an inner spirit or soul. There is some validity to the charge of essentialism, but it is important also to draw out the ambivalence in Balázs's account of the physiognomy of the film image. While on the one hand such terms as 'visible spirit' suggest an essential equivalence between face and 'soul', image and essence, Balázs elsewhere is at pains to stress film's 'physiognomy' as the product of a specific *relationship* between inner and outer worlds. Thus in the essay on Asta Nielsen that concludes *Visible Man*, what is highlighted is not the status of her face or body as unmediated expression of inner life, but rather the process of production of meaning and affect in which Nielsen is engaged as she actively mobilizes an 'extensive vocabulary' of gesture and expression to create a screen presence.

For Balázs, Nielsen is thus in every respect a 'consummate artist' who deploys her body actively as an expressive vehicle and thereby 'converts her life into art'. It is, moreover, not only in relation to performance that Balázs locates the film image as a point of synthesis in a dialectic between inner and outer worlds. In his third preface, Balázs's plea to the film audience is for a contemplative reception mode (he calls it 'thoughtful savouring') that will open the body of the spectator to a collective perception of the aesthetic values which inhere in the film image ('I want', he writes, 'to stimulate your senses and nerves'). Here too, the film image becomes the meeting point of a social process whose products are the meanings, the affects and the values that accrue around film: for 'more than any art', Balázs finally stresses, 'film is a social art. Every other art is shaped in its essentials by the artist's tastes and talent. In the case of film, the audience's taste and talent will be the decisive factors. Your great mission lies in this collaboration.'¹⁰

Balázs's enthusiasm for the visual body as the repository of a potentially transformative popular experience was not shared by all his contemporaries on the Weimar cultural Left. Kracauer's critique of Balázs, for instance, rested on his own perception that the socially emblematic body in cinematic representation was not the lived body in cinematic performance but the abstract body of the chorus line or the

¹⁰ Balázs, *Der sichtbare Mensch*, pp. 14–15.

11 See Erica Carter, *Dietrich's Ghosts: the Sublime and the Beautiful in Third Reich Film* (London: British Film Institute, 2004), pp. 67, 94–5 and *passim*. It should be noted that Balázs explicitly names the universal body as white, European and male, and indeed celebrates film's capacity to create the 'unique, shared psyche of the ... white race': see Balázs, *Der sichtbare Mensch*, p. 22.

12 Jan Campbell, *Psychoanalysis and the Time of Life: Durations of the Unconscious Self* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), p. 9. See also Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism* (New York, NY: Zone, 1988). Hanno Loewy provides a lengthy contextualization of Balázs in relation to Simmel and Bergson, and cites as an example of Balázs's early preoccupation with the phenomenology of time his *Dialogus a dialogus/Dialogue on Dialogue* (Bundespess: Athenäum, 1913), pp. 82–74, 108–97.

13 *Bilderführung* literally means 'image direction', but actually refers to montage. Given Balázs's opposition to theories of montage as developed by Eisenstein, we have chosen here to translate *Bilderführung* as 'visual linkage'. This retains the original emphasis both on the single shot that is contained in the word *Bild*, and on the continuity between shots. 'Linkage' has the added benefit of an association with Pudovkin, who is said to have been influenced by Balázs.

regimented mass ornament – symbolic formations that literalized the rationalization process of advanced capitalism and were in this sense the more authentic representations of modern experience. While Kracauer might have been correct in identifying *Visible Man*'s weakness as social theory (and Kracauer was certainly vindicated in his political distrust of Balázs when the latter's work was later reclaimed for the racialized film aesthetics of the Third Reich),¹¹ Balázs nonetheless stands out among his contemporaries as a consummate analyst of actorly performance. In the extracts below, we focus on Balázs's accounts of the body, acting and performance that highlight his perspicacity as an observer of the minute expressive shifts through which screen actors generate collective engagement with film art.

Our second selection is from sections of *Visible Man* that locate the visual body temporally within what Balázs identifies as cinema's living flow of moving images. Early studies under Georg Simmel, and his knowledge of Simmel's critical engagement with Henri Bergson, had alerted Balázs to a vitalist phenomenological tradition centring on understandings of the body as a site of multiple flows of sensation, meaning and affect. As Jan Campbell has explained, consciousness was understood in this tradition – which Deleuze was to term 'transcendental empiricism' – as arising out of flows of affect, and an intersubjective play of difference across lived bodies in time and space. The influence of the vitalist argument for 'being as time, which is a constant flux of creativity, difference and becoming' was already evident in Balázs's early essays.¹² In *Visible Man*, a similar preoccupation with the body in time surfaces in Balázs's observations on montage, tempo and rhythm. Unlike Eisenstein, whose 'montage of attractions' he would later publicly criticize, Balázs favoured an understanding of editing as linkage and continuity, not collision – as evidenced in his choice of the idiosyncratic term *Bilderführung* (visual linkage) for his discussions of montage in *Visible Man*.¹³ Balázs's description of linkage, moreover, as the 'living breath' of cinema situates the body image that is this book's central focus as a site of precisely those intersubjective flows of affect and experience with which not only twentieth-century vitalism, but also twenty-first-century film phenomenology, is centrally concerned. A closer investigation of the phenomenology of film as it developed in the early silent era is thus timely, and it is in that spirit that extracts from the early German work of Balázs are presented overleaf.

Visible Man

The discovery of printing has gradually rendered the human face illegible. People have been able to glean so much from reading that they could afford to neglect other forms of communication.

Victor Hugo once wrote that the printed book has taken over the role of mediaeval cathedrals and has become the repository of the spirit of the people. But the thousands of books fragmented the single spirit of the cathedrals into a myriad different opinions. The printed word smashed the stone to smithereens and broke up the church into a thousand books.

In this way, the *visible spirit* was transformed into a legible spirit, and a *visual culture* was changed into a conceptual one. . . . Since the advent of printing the word has become the principal bridge joining human beings to one another. The soul has migrated into the word and become crystallized there. The body, however, has been stripped of soul and emptied.

The expressive surface of our bodies has been reduced to just our face. This is not simply because we cover the other parts of our bodies with clothes. Our face has now come to resemble a clumsy little semaphore of the soul, sticking up in the air and signalling as best it may. Sometimes, our hands help out a little, evoking the melancholy of mutilated limbs. The back of a headless Greek torso always reveals whether the lost face was laughing or weeping – we can still see this clearly. Venus's hips smile as expressively as her face, and casting a veil over her head would not be enough to stop us from guessing her thoughts and feelings. For in those days man was visible in his entire body. In a culture dominated by words, however, now that the soul has become audible, it has grown almost invisible. This is what the printing press has done.

Well, the situation now is that once again our culture is being given a radically new direction – this time by film. Every evening many millions of people sit and experience human destinies, characters, feelings and moods of every kind with their eyes, and without the need for words. For the intertitles that films still have are insignificant; they are partly the ephemeral rudiments of as yet undeveloped forms, and partly they bear a special meaning that does not set out to assist the visual expression. The whole of mankind is now busy relearning the long-forgotten language of gestures and facial expressions. This language is not the substitute for words characteristic of sign language for the deaf-and-dumb, but the visual corollary of human souls immediately made flesh. *Man will become visible once again.*

Modern philologists and historians of language have established that the origins of language are to be found in *expressive movements*. By this we mean that when man began to speak he began like a child, by moving

his tongue and lips in the same way as his hands and his facial muscles; in other words, uttering sounds was not his original intention. Initially, the movements of his tongue and lips were no more than spontaneous gestures, on a par with other bodily gestures. The fact that he uttered sounds at the same time was a secondary phenomenon, one subsequently exploited for practical purposes. The immediately visible spirit was then transformed into a mediated audible spirit and much was lost in the process, as in all translation. But the language of gestures is the true mother tongue of mankind.

We are beginning to recall this language and are poised to learn it anew. As yet, it is still clumsy and primitive, and far from able to rival the subtleties of modern verbal art. But because its roots in human nature are older and deeper than the spoken language, and because it is nevertheless fundamentally new, its stammerings and stutterings often articulate ideas that the artists of the word strive in vain to express.

... The culture of words is dematerialized, abstract and over-intellectualized; it degrades the human body to the status of a biological organism. But the new language of gestures that is emerging at present arises from our painful yearning to be human beings with our entire bodies, from top to toe and not merely in our speech. We long to stop dragging our body around like an alien thing that is useful only as a practical set of tools. This new language arises from our yearning for the *embodied* human being who has fallen silent, who has been forgotten and has become invisible. ...

(T)oday this visual man is in an in-between state: no longer there and not yet present. It is a law of nature that any organ that falls into disuse degenerates and atrophies. In the culture of words our bodies were not fully used and have lost their expressiveness in consequence. ... Culture does not just refer to the beautiful poses of statues in the art galleries, but to the gait and the everyday gestures of people in the street or at their work. Culture means the penetration of the ordinary material of life by the human spirit, and a visual culture would have to find new and different forms with which to express people's behaviour in their daily intercourse with one another. The art of dance cannot do this; it is a task that will be accomplished by film. ...

In general, culture appears to be taking the road from the abstract mind to the visible body. ... Conscious knowledge turns into instinctive sensibility: *it is materialized as culture in the body*. The body's expressiveness is always the latest product of a cultural process. This means that however primitive and barbarous the film may be in comparison to *modern* literature, it nevertheless represents the cultural mainstream because it incorporates the direct transformation of spirit into body.

This path leads in two apparently opposite directions. At first glance, it appears as if the language of physiognomy could only increase and intensify the process of estrangement and alienation that started with the confusion of tongues in the Tower of Babel. This cultural path seemed to

point towards the isolation of the individual, to loneliness. For after all, following the confusion of tongues in Babel, communities still survived who acquired the words and concepts of their common mother tongue, and a shared dictionary and grammar rescued human beings from the ultimate solitariness of mutual incomprehension. However, the language of gestures is far more individual and personal than the language of words. Admittedly, facial expressions have their own vocabulary of 'conventional' standard forms, so much so that we could and indeed should compile a comparative dictionary of these expressions on the model of comparative linguistics. However, although this language of gestures has its traditions, it is unlike grammar in that it lacks strict rules, whose neglect would be severely punished in school. This language is still so young that it can be smoothly moulded to fit the particular nature of each individual. It is still at the stage where it can be created by the mind, rather than mind being created by it.

On the other hand, the art of film seems to hold out the promise of redemption from the curse of Babel. The screens of the entire world are now starting to project the *first international language* ... the language of gestures which has become standardized in film.

Sketches for a theory of film

Linguistic gesture and the language of gestures

Can we interpret expressive movement and the visual in general as the special province of film? After all, the stage actor also speaks with his whole body and stage decor likewise exists to be looked at.

But the facial expressions and other gestures of a speaking actor are different. They express only what is left over. *Whatever has to be said*, but will not go into words, is added with the aid of the actor's facial muscles and hands.

In film, however, the play of facial expressions is not an optional extra, and this distinction means not only that gestures in film are more explicit and detailed, but that they operate on an entirely different plane. For the speaker brings to light a different stratum of the soul from the one evoked by, say, the musician or dancer. Dependent as he is on language, the gestures that accompany his words spring from the same source as them. Optically, they may seem similar to a dancer's, but they are informed by a different spirit. A speaker's gestures have the same emotional content as his words, for the dimensions of the soul cannot be mixed. It is merely that they refer to words as yet unborn.

A dancer's gestures, however, have their origins elsewhere and they have a different meaning. They are the characteristic expression of a characteristic human being and hence the characteristic material of a characteristic form of art. They are as unrelated to the gestures of a speaker as they are to his words.

I would like to clarify this with an illustration. Every language has a musical component and every word its own melody. But the music of language, although similar acoustically to actual music, possesses no inner musicality. It has the atmosphere of concepts and helps to enhance the process of rational discrimination. However, music is not just an acoustic matter; it is a separate sphere of the soul. And indeed, facial expressions and gestures are themselves no mere optical matter.

I was speaking of dancers. But the film actor does not dance. Nevertheless, he is not dependent on words and plays no part in the rational world of concepts. There appears to be a third realm between the speaker's world of gestures and the decorative expressive movements of the dancer, and this realm has its own form of interiority. The *gestural language* of film is as far removed from the *linguistic gestures* of theatre as it is from dance.

...

The play of facial expressions

There was once a French film in which Suzanne Desprès played the lead even though she made no contribution to the 'plot'. The film went like this. In a short overture we see a beggar woman sitting with her dying child, beseeching fate to take pity. Death appears and tells the mother: 'I shall show you the predestined life of your child. Watch it and if you still want her to live, then so be it.' Then the actual film unfolds, the fate of the child a mundane, insignificant story. But the mother, Suzanne Desprès, watches. In the left-hand corner of the film we see her face as she is watching the film, like us, accompanying the adventures of her child with the play of her facial expressions. We watch for an hour and a half as hope, fear, joy, emotion, sadness, courage, the white heat of conviction and the blackness of despair pass across her face. The film's real drama, its essential content, is played out on her face. The 'story' was only the pretext.

... Gaumont knew what it was doing to pay Suzanne Desprès such a high fee for her role. For the public and the film business had already discovered something that our aesthetes and literati have not yet noticed. This is that *what matters in film is not the storyline but the lyrical*.

The narrative of feelings

The play of expressions expresses feelings; in other words it is lyrical. It is a form of lyricism that is incomparably richer and fuller of nuance than literary works of whatever kind. Facial expressions are vastly more numerous than words! And looks can express every shade of emotion far more precisely than a description! And how much more personal is the expression of a face than words that others too may use! And how much more concrete and unambiguous is physiognomy than concepts, which are always abstract and general!

It is here that we see the poetry of film at its most authentic and profound. A person who judges a film by its storyline seems to me to

resemble someone who says of a love poem: 'What's so special about this poem? She is beautiful and he loves her!' Films, however wonderful, frequently have little more to say. But they say it in a way that poetry cannot match.

There are two particular reasons for this. One is that the meaning of words is in part more time-bound than facial expressions; the other is that since words are uttered in sequence, no simultaneous harmony, no meaningful chords, can arise. I shall explain this further.

There is a film in which Asta Nielsen is looking out of the window and sees someone coming. A mortal fear, a petrified horror, appears on her face. But she gradually realizes that she is mistaken and that the man who is approaching, far from spelling disaster, is the answer to her prayers. The expression of horror on her face is gradually modulated through the entire scale of feelings from hesitant doubt, anxious hope and cautious joy, right through to exultant happiness. We watch her face in closeup for some twenty metres of film. We see every hint of expression around her eyes and mouth and watch them relax one by one and slowly change. For minutes on end we witness the organic *development of her feelings*, and nothing beyond.

Such an emotional development cannot be depicted in words, however poetic. Every word signifies a separate stage, a process that gives rise to a staccato of isolated snapshots of the feelings. The fact is that one word has to have come to an end before another one can begin. *But a facial expression need not have been completed before another one starts to infiltrate it and gradually displace it entirely.* In the *legato* of visual continuity, past and future expressions merge into one another and display not just the individual states of the soul but also the mysterious process of development itself. This narrative of the feelings enables film to give us something unique.

The chords of the emotions

In general, facial expressions are more 'polyphonic' than language. The succession of words resembles the successive notes of a melody. But a face can display the most varied emotions *simultaneously*, like a chord, and the relationships between these different emotions is what creates the rich amalgam of harmonies and modulations. These are the chords of feeling whose essence is in fact their simultaneity. Such simultaneity cannot be expressed in words.

Pola Negri once acted Carmen.¹⁴ She flirted with the truculent José and her face expressed joy and submissiveness at the same time, since she finds some pleasure in having to humble herself a little. But at the moment when José falls at her feet and she sees his weakness and helplessness, the look on her face becomes *superior* and *sad* at the same time. Moreover, she really has just one look in which these different elements cannot be separated out; each expression rubs off on the other. It points to the painful disappointment she feels at realizing that she is the stronger. The woman has lost the battle because she has emerged as

¹⁴ *Carmen*/Gypsy Blood (Ernst Lubitsch, 1918) was a film version not of Bizet's opera but of the story by Prosper Mérimée that had inspired it. This and all following notes are the translator's.

victor. But by formulating what happens in words, we just cause a *single* expression to crumble. And as soon as we begin to speak, we somehow say something different.

The tempo of emotions

In *Way Down East*,¹⁵ Lillian Gish plays a trusting girl who has been seduced. When the man tells her that he has deceived her and made a fool of her, she cannot believe her ears. She knows what he says is true, but wants to believe that he is just joking. And for five whole minutes she laughs and cries by turns, at least a dozen times.

We would need many printed pages to describe the storms that pass over this tiny, pale face. Reading them would also take up much time. But the nature of these feelings lies precisely in the crazy rapidity with which they succeed one another. The effect of this play of facial expressions lies in *its ability to replicate the original tempo of her emotions*.

That is something that words are incapable of. The description of a feeling always lasts longer than the time taken by the feeling itself. The rhythm of our inner turbulence will inevitably be lost in every literary narrative.

The visible possibilities and the morality of physiognomy

In *Fortune's Fool*,¹⁶ Emil Jannings plays the part of the worst kind of profiteer. Every gesture, every facial expression shows him to be a bloodsucker, a remorseless shark. And yet! Somehow or other he remains a sympathetic character. There is something about his face that we cannot help liking. It is his naivety, something childlike, that persists as a covert decency *at the same time* as his dirty looks. It makes us believe that he is capable of kindness. At the end of the film, this better self becomes visible. But the fact that we can see these signs of goodness from the very outset even in his nastiest expressions is a miracle of polyphonic physiognomy.

A good film actor never presents us with surprises. Since film permits of no psychological explanations, the possibility of a change in personality must be plainly written in an actor's face from the outset. What is exciting is to discover a hidden quality, in the corner of the mouth, for example, and to see how from this germ the entire new human being grows and spreads over his entire face. Hebbel's remark, 'Whatever a man is capable of becoming, he already is', can and indeed must become physiognomical reality in the cinema.

The fact that a deeper face is both visible and hidden also provides a clue to the moral significance of physiognomy. For even in film a simple distinction between good people and bad is not enough. In literature the hidden moral qualities of a man can only be shown by loosening his mask or removing it altogether. What we find moving and also exciting in physiognomy, however, is its simultaneity, the fact that it is possible to discover goodness in the very expression of evil. Many a face surprises us with a deeper look, as if gazing out at us through the eyes of a mask.

¹⁵ *Way Down East* (D.W. Griffith, 1920).

¹⁶ Also known as *Alles für Geld/All for Money* (Reinhold Schünzel, 1923).

There are many opportunities for producing tension in all this. A man may be depicted as a rogue and a scoundrel in all his actions. But his face tells us that it cannot be him. This contradiction creates a dilemma for the audience and we impatiently await its resolution. It endows a character with the vitality that only such an enigma can create.

The drama of facial expressions

The play of facial expressions in film is not just lyrical in its function. There are also ways of depicting the external action in purely physiognomic terms. Admittedly, this is a pinnacle that is only rarely attained in the cinema today. I shall give an example. A film by Joe May, *Die Tragödie der Liebe*,¹⁷ contains a regular physiognomical duel. The examining magistrate sits across the bench from the accused. We do not learn what they say to each other. But both dissemble and disguise their true face behind expressions they have assumed. Each tries to discover what lies behind the other's mask. And by using their facial expressions to attack each other and to defend themselves, each strives to provoke his interlocutor into giving himself away by assuming a treacherous expression (just as one might try to induce someone to say more than he intends).

Such a duel of facial expressions is much more exciting than a verbal duel. A statement can be retracted or reinterpreted, but no statement is as utterly revealing as a facial expression.

In a truly artistic film the dramatic climax between two people will always be shown as a dialogue of facial expressions in closeup.

Closeup

I am speaking here of physiognomy and the play of facial expression as if they were a speciality and even a monopoly of film, and yet they also play a pivotal role in the theatre. But it is not to be compared with their importance in film. First, because in the theatre we listen to the words and so (both we and the actors) fail to concentrate on the characters' faces and notice only the crudest, most schematic, expressions. Second, the actor has to speak clearly for our ears and this impairs the spontaneous movements of the mouth and hence of the face as a whole. Third, because on the stage – for obvious technical reasons – we can never observe a face for so long, in such detail and as intensively as in a film closeup.

The closeup is the technical precondition for the art of facial expression and hence of the higher art of film in general. A face has to be brought really close to us and it must be isolated from any context that might distract our attention (likewise something that is not possible on the stage); we must be able to dwell on the sight so as to be able to read it properly. The film calls for a subtlety and assurance in depicting facial expressions of which actors who just appear on the stage can only dream. In closeups every wrinkle becomes a crucial element of character and every twitch of a muscle testifies to a pathos that signals great inner events. The closeup of a face is frequently used as the climax of an important scene; it must be the lyrical essence of the entire drama. If the

17 *Die Tragödie der Liebe*/The Tragedy of Love (Joe May, 1923), featured Emil Jannings and, in a lesser role, Marlene Dietrich.

sudden appearance of such an image is not to appear meaningless, we have to be able to recognize its links with the drama as a whole. The latter will be reflected in its features, just as a small lake reflects all the mountains that surround it. In the theatre, even the most important face is never more than one element in the play. In the film, however, when a face spreads over the entire screen in a closeup, this face becomes 'the whole thing' that contains the entire drama for minutes on end.

Closeups are film's true terrain. With the closeup the new territory of this new art opens up. It bears the name: 'The little things of life'. But even the biggest things of life consist of these 'little things', individual details and single moments, while the larger contours are mainly the result of the insensitivity and sloppiness with which we ignore the little things and blur their outlines. The abstract picture of the big things of life arises mainly from our myopia.

But the magnifying glass of the cinematograph brings us closer to the individual cells of life, it allows us to feel the texture and substance of life in its concrete detail. It shows you what your hand is doing, though normally you take no notice when it strokes someone or hits out at them. You live in it and pay no attention to it. The magnifying glass of the film camera will show you your shadow on the wall, something you live with without noticing, and it will show you the adventures and the ultimate fate of the cigar in your unsuspecting hand, and the secret – because unheeded – life of all the things that accompany you on your way and that taken together make up the events of your life. You have observed life much as a bad musician observes an orchestral piece. He hears only the leading melody and the rest of it merges into a general sound. Through its closeups a good film will teach you to read the score of the polyphony of life, the individual voices of all things which go to make up the great symphony.

In a good film, the decisive moment of the actual storyline is never shown in long shot. For in a long shot you can never see what is really happening. When I see a finger pulling the trigger and after that see the wound breaking open, then I have seen the start and finish of an action, its birth and transformation. Everything that comes between those two events is invisible, like a bullet in flight.

The director guides your gaze

What is specific to film about these closeups? After all, the theatre director could also carefully prepare such individual effects on the stage. The answer lies in the possibility of lifting the single image out of the whole. This not only enables us to see the minute atoms of life more clearly than anything on stage, but in addition the director uses them to guide our gaze. On the stage we always see the total picture in which these small moments dwindle into insignificance. But if they are emphasized, they lose the mood created by their very obscurity. By contrast, in film the director guides our gaze with the aid of closeups and

also follows up the long shot with shots showing the hidden corners in which the mute life of things retains its secret mood.

The closeup in film is the art of emphasis. It is a mute pointing to important and significant detail, while at the same time providing an interpretation of the life depicted. Two films with the same plot, the same acting and the same long shots but with different closeups will express two different views of life.

The naturalism of love

Closeups are a kind of naturalism. They amount to the sharp observation of detail. However, such observation contains an element of tenderness, and I should like to call it the naturalism of love. For what you truly love, you also know well, and you gaze upon its minutest details with fond attentiveness. (Needless to say, there is also a sharp observation driven by hatred that we may likewise call naturalism.) In films with many good closeups you often gain the impression that these shots are not so much the product of a good eye as of a good heart. They radiate warmth, a diffuse lyricism whose particular artistic significance is that it moves us without lapsing into sentimentality. It remains impersonal and objective. A tender feeling towards things is aroused without being made explicit (or described in the usual clichés).

'Inserting' extreme closeups

Over and above the closeup, the tools with which to achieve emphasis include the concentration of lighting, 'effects lighting', and background shots. All of these present a director with the problem of visual linkage. ... Linkage, in other words the sequence of images and their tempo, corresponds to style in literature. The fact that the same story can be told in very different ways and with different effects depends on the conciseness and the rhythm of the individual sentences. In the same way, linkage will give the film its rhythmic character. It will ensure that the images will flow smoothly and in a broad stream, like the hexameter in a classical epic, or else like a ballad, flaring up breathlessly and then dying down again, like a drama, rising inexorably towards a climax, or tingling capriciously. Linkage is the living breath of film and everything depends on it.

The first problem in linkage arises from the fact that the images cannot be conjugated. We can write, 'The hero *went* home, and when he entered ...'. But an image exists only in the present and so the film can only show him *going*. Or else nothing at all. And the question is, 'What can and what should we leave out?'

Directors who come to film from the theatre often bring with them the prejudice about 'concentrating on essentials' and the need to 'focus' on large, detailed and crucial set-piece scenes. This means that there is always something of a chilling vacuum in the intervening scenes. The living, warm flow of life congeals into great blocks of ice.

However, the 'essentials' in a film are located elsewhere than on the stage, in a different dimension. The novelist knows full well why he does

not present his story in three great concentrated acts, why he narrates a thousand little 'incidental' happenings. It is because he is interested in knitting together the texture of the atmosphere that is always ruptured and destroyed when the meaning of the action is revealed in a spectacular scene. This meaning may be the kernel of the entire work. But a kernel does not produce a fruit's juice and aroma.

Yet the words a novelist has to use are always clear-cut concepts whose sharp claws scratch an unambiguous meaning from everything, while the purely visual nature of film enables us to see that *indeterminate something* that can only ever appear between the lines even in the best of novelists. A good director will work with a 'thin flow' of images linking a number of subsidiary scenes in ways that will always seem surprising and new to us, like snapshots of movements that show us quite unfamiliar positions of the body. But the movement of life itself also consists of such unfamiliar positions (positions of the soul) that are easily obliterated by a focus on 'essentials', but that are revealed to us by film for the first time.

Interpolated images

The exclusively present nature of images means that our *experience of time* in a film is an especially problematic aspect of visual linkage. Because the original running time of an action is presented in a visually continuous sequence of images, the only way to 'let time pass' is to interrupt the scene by interpolating extra images. But the mere length of such interpolated images is not enough to enable the audience to gauge *how much* time has elapsed.

Length of time is a mood, not an objective fact to be measured by the clock. Whether we feel that one minute has passed or many hours depends on the rhythm of a scene, the space in which it is set and even the way it is lit. There are curious connections between our sense of time and space and they deserve closer psychological investigation. For example, the fact that *the further the location of an interpolated scene is from that of the principal scene, the greater is the illusion that a longer time has elapsed*. If we interrupt a scene in a room with another in the hall, however long the second scene lasts it does not suggest much more time has passed than the time taken by the scene itself. But if the interpolated scene leads us into a different town or even a foreign country, it will arouse the illusion of such a great shift of 'time-space' that we shall not find it easy to transport ourselves back into the original scene.

The twin necessities of interpolated scenes on the one hand and visual continuity on the other often appear to present an almost insoluble contradiction and turn visual linkage into the director's most delicate task. He has to know how to ensure that the mood of one scene continues to illuminate the mood of the following one. Just as the colour in a painting takes on a different hue depending on the colours adjacent to it, so too the mood of one scene will be influenced by the scene that precedes it. An interpolated scene, therefore, may diverge from the main action but must be related to it in mood.

This continuity of mood also helps to maintain the memory of what has gone before and also the general context, thus replacing the need to rely on the expedient of titles. Small motifs, objects, gestures and sometimes just the lighting can all evoke the associations of an earlier scene and, like visual leitmotifs that barely cross the threshold of consciousness, they enable us to grasp the main thrust of the plot.

Passageways

It is necessary here to say something about scenes of passage. These are transitional scenes that show us only how a character moves from one location to another. Many directors, especially those who come to cinema from the theatre, used to be strongly prejudiced against these scenes, regarding them as dead spaces in the film, clumsy expedients.

But passageways contain a film's lyrical element. The hero's solitary comings and goings before and after his great scene are his soliloquies, and in film these are not even 'unnatural'. Thanks to its *ritardando* effect, the hero's progress to the decisive scene can produce a preparatory tension, an atmospheric springboard, and the image of passage following the dramatic climax can present its impact, the emotional result. It can achieve this far more effectively than the climactic scene itself, where the events of the external action often obscure their internal ramifications.

In these performed monologues of walking, an actor can often display his art more fully than in the most turbulent dramatic scenes. The reason is that these latter scenes are full of gestures that have not merely an *inner motive* but also an *external purpose*. Such purposive gestures are not simply expressive in function; they are partly determined by the external action and hence do not provide an actor with the same opportunity to express emotions as an image of passage. When two men walk quietly side by side, their gait will reveal the differences in their characters. If they are fighting, however, even the wildest movements will cease to express the subtle differences of character and mood between them.

I can very well imagine an impressionist cinematic style – I might also term it a Maeterlinckian style – in which the principal scenes are not shown at all, but only the presentiments and lyrical after-effects of the events concerned – moments of passage.

In *The Phantom*,¹⁸ Alfred Abel spends a lot of time wandering alone through the streets. But nowhere else in the film do we see so clearly that here is a lost soul, a deluded man who has gone astray, a man intoxicated by dreams who is doomed to fall into the abyss. In the scenes with other people we can still entertain the belief that the danger comes from them and that he might well be spared. But when he is alone, the way he walks tells us that the danger is in himself. He is inwardly wounded and he staggers around like a man who has been shot. (And in general, the way a protagonist walks expresses the gesture governing his destiny.)

And to see Conrad Veidt's walk! It is hard to imagine a film whose main dramatic scenes could equal the intensity of Veidt's images of passage. The way he walks as the sleepwalking medium in *Caligari* is

¹⁸ *The Phantom/Phantom*
(F.W. Murnau, 1922), with Alfred
Abel in the lead role, was based
on a novel by Gerhart Hauptmann.

like the slow, very slow, flight of an arrow bringing an ineluctable death. And in general, Veidt's gait resembles a spear cleaving the space in front of it and pointing to the direction fate intends to take.

In one film Lilian Gish plays a poor girl looking in vain for work and we see her walking along the street, exhausted and desperate. Every step she takes is like someone shutting her eyes, letting her head droop and falling under the wheels of a car.

Needless to say, passageways must not be treated as being of secondary importance. There are directors who prepare the decisive scenes with great care and ensure that they are played by the very best actors. But once the hero has left the room, the same directors may well ignore the servant who helps him into his coat or the chauffeur who opens the car door for him. Such interpolated scenes are treated as nothing more than dead linking material, as mere glue, and are not 'acted' at all. But such lifeless gaps act like a blast of cold air on the rest of the film; the audience does not notice where the cold comes from, but may feel the chill nonetheless. However, if directors keep a tight rein on even the tiniest scenes they will give the film a *continuity of illusion* that creates an atmospheric warmth that cannot be pinned down and that permeates the film as a whole.

Simultaneism and refrain

Visual linkage in film contains the most varied stylistic possibilities. I should like to refer to just two that I believe will play a special role in modern developments. The first style, one that can already be seen here and there, I should like to call 'simultaneism', after the most modern school of lyric poetry, with Walt Whitman as its most significant representative. For it is based on the same intention, namely the wish to present not merely a single image of the world at large, but a number of *simultaneous* events, even if there is no causal relationship between these events and the principal one, or among these simultaneous events themselves. By means of this cross-section of life as *a whole*, the aim is to create a cosmic impression, an impression of the entire world, since this alone can depict the world in its reality.

Abel Gance made attempts of this sort; he strove to depict not just an action but at the same time its entire context. For example, when we follow the fate of his hero in Paris, the narrative is constantly interrupted by momentary flashes in which we see villages, people working in the fields, or a girl at a window. None of these things is relevant to the plot, but they represent a simultaneous reality. In that reality life is going on as usual and that should not be forgotten.

I believe that the theoretical hopes placed in this style cannot be fulfilled in practice. They give the film *a false dimension*; a dimension of breadth instead of depth. To convey depth film should focus not on the neglected images of remote distances, but on the neglected images of things close to us, the invisible aspects of our own experienced moments. Furthermore, by inserting the action together with a number of motifs into a spatial perspective that evinces no sign of a before and after, such a

simultaneous representation of the surrounding circumstances nullifies all sense of time.

...

Tempo

In general, tempo is one of the most fascinating and important secrets of film. ... A long take means something different from a short one. The length or brevity of a scene is not just a matter of rhythm, but rather it *determines its meaning*. (A doubtless vain reminder to distributors and cinema proprietors and all those who cut the director's work without his consent.) Every second counts. Just cut a metre of film and the scene – if it was a good one – will not only be shorter but have changed its meaning. It has been given a new mood-content.

Moreover, it often will have become shorter only in terms of physical length; in its mood it will have lengthened. The internal tempo of the images is entirely independent of the time required to show them in reality. There are scenes in which, by showing a large number of minor objects in closeup, the passing of the seconds produces the effect of dramatic tempo. When these details are cut, what remains is a general image that is no more than a lifeless frame. This may well take less time to see but it is not possible to fill such a frame with tension.

We can illustrate this situation with the aid of a simile that is perhaps not quite exact: if I look at the picture of an anthill in closeup, with the detailed images of its teeming activity, such images will have tempo. But if I shorten it by cutting out the closeups so that I am left with the generalized picture of an ant heap, a mere geometrical shape, and the act of cutting will result only in filling the film with internal *longueurs*.

In the cinema every storyline resembles such an ant heap. The closer and more detailed our view, the more life and tempo it has. But when the events are just noted fleetingly, they are drained of all vitality. When an event just flits past, we merely *note its presence* without actually seeing it. It does not come to life before our eyes and has only the meaning of a kind of literature in hieroglyphs. Moreover, on its own even a concept, a word, can have no tempo, and the brief synopsis of a novel will always be more boring than the novel itself.

There are films that produce one interesting scene after another and yet are quite lacking in tension because scarcely have we reached one situation than the film's faulty tempo hustles us on to the next. A protracted duel makes for a more exciting scene than the lightning thrust of a dagger. It seems in general as if *the only thing that produces tempo in a scene is the mobility of the atoms of which it is composed*. This is because the spoken word can always call to mind the plot in its entirety, but it is only the momentary that enables us to *see*.

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